

THREE-DIMENSIONAL IMAGING WITH MULTIFRAME BLIND DECONVOLUTION

BACKGROUND

[0001] Atmospheric blurring is a major limitation to forming images of high-altitude and space objects using ground-based telescopes. This limitation may be quantified by the seeing coherence length, also known as Fried's seeing parameter, r_0 , which provides a measure of the largest spatial frequency that is present in a long-exposure image formed by a telescope of interest. For many telescopes and atmospheric imaging systems, the seeing parameter r_0 typically has values under 10 cm.

[0002] Diffraction-limited telescopes may record spatial frequencies as the ratio of $D/\lambda d_0$, where D is the telescope diameter, λ is the nominal wavelength being sensed, and d_0 is the distance from the telescope to the observed object. In many situations, however, long exposure imagery acquired through atmospheric turbulence may only contain frequencies up to the turbulence-limited cut-off frequency $r_0/\lambda d_0$.

[0003] While exposure times on the order of a few milliseconds or less may provide images with spatial frequency information out to the diffraction limit, blur effects from atmospheric turbulence can degrade such images and diminish resolution capability.

[0004] What are needed therefore are systems and methods for three-dimensional imaging of objects through atmospheric turbulence with high resolution capability.

SUMMARY

[0005] Embodiments of the present invention are directed to three-dimensional imaging of objects or targets through atmospheric turbulence with high resolution capability.

[0006] A first embodiment may include a system for three-dimensional imaging including a first light source producing a first output including two or more pulses. Means may be included for directing the first output to a target. Receiving means may also be included and may be operable to receive a portion of the first output reflected from the target through atmospheric turbulence. A first image sensor may be included that produces or records two or more two-dimensional image slices of the target. A second image sensor may detect or record one or more second sensor images of the target from the light from of the first light source. Means for multiframe blind deconvolution may be included and may be operable to determine a point spread function from a second sensor image. Means for deconvolution operable to deconvolve the point spread function from the two or more two-dimensional image slices may be used to produce a two or more deblurred two-dimensional image slices. Means for combining the deblurred two-dimensional image slices may be included and used to form a three-dimensional image of the target. A second light source may also be used.

[0007] The means for multiframe blind deconvolution may include a computer readable medium having instructions to perform the step of estimating a point spread function from a second sensor image. The means for deconvolution may include a computer readable medium having instructions to perform the step of deconvolving a point spread function from the two or more two-dimensional image slices to produce two or more deblurred two-dimensional image slices. The means for combining may include a computer readable medium having instructions to perform the steps of combining deblurred two-dimensional image slices and forming a three-dimensional image of the target. The means for directing may include a laser beam director. The first light source may include a laser having an active medium made of Cr:LiSAF or Nd:YAG. The two or more pulses of the first output may have a fluence of about 0.1 to about 100 Joules per pulse. Each of the two or more pulses may have a pulse width of less than five (5) nanoseconds.

[0008] A second embodiment may include a method for creating a three-dimensional image of a target through atmospheric turbulence. A first output of pulses from a laser may be directed to a target. Pulses of the first output that are reflected from the target may pass through atmospheric turbulence and be received. Two or more two-dimensional image slices may be

formed at a first image sensor. One or more second sensor images of the target may be formed at a second image sensor. Multiframe blind deconvolution may be performed on the one or more second sensor images. A point spread function may be determined from the one or more second sensor images. The point spread function may be used to deconvolve each of the two or more two-dimensional image slices. Deblurred two-dimensional image slices may be formed from the two dimensional image slices. The deblurred two-dimensional image slices may be combined to form a three-dimensional image of the target.

[0009] The two or more two-dimensional image slices may be stored and the step of storing the two or more two-dimensional image slices may include storing the two-dimensional image slices in a first image sensor. Sunlight may be received that is reflected from the target through the atmospheric turbulence. A second output of pulses from a second laser may be directed to the target. The step of performing multiframe blind deconvolution further include incorporating *a priori* knowledge of the point spread function or the target. The said step of incorporating *a priori* knowledge may include incorporating positivity constraints. A maximum likelihood of a noise function may be calculated and one or more gradients of a noiseless image of the target may be calculated.

[0010] A third embodiment may include a method of forming a three-dimensional image of an object including determining a point spread function from an image of the object from an incoherent source and deconvolving two or more two-dimensional image slices of the object formed from coherent light using the point spread function, forming deblurred image slices. The deblurred image slices may be combined to form a three-dimensional image of the object.

[0011] A fourth embodiment may include a three-dimensional imaging system including a point spread function calculated from an image formed from an incoherent light source. A three-dimensional image may include two or more two-dimensional image slices formed from a coherent light source. The two or more two-dimensional image slices may be deblurred by the point spread function.

[0012] The three-dimensional imaging system may include processing means operable to

calculate the point spread function. The processing means may include means for multiframe blind deconvolution operable to determine the point spread function. The processing means may include means for deconvolution operable to deconvolve said two-dimensional image slices using the point spread function. The processing means may include means for combining said two-dimensional image slices. The three-dimensional imaging system may include an incoherent light source, a coherent light source, or both. The three-dimensional imaging system may include a first image sensor operable to produce two or more two-dimensional image slices. The first image sensor may be a time of arrival image sensor operable to produce two-dimensional image slices. The three-dimensional imaging system may also include a second image sensor.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0013] These and other features, aspects, and advantages of the present invention will become better understood with regard to the following description, appended claims, and accompanying drawings. The drawings are not necessarily to scale, emphasis instead being placed upon illustrating the principles of the present invention. The drawings include the following:

[0014] FIG. 1 is a conceptual diagram of a three-dimensional imaging system.

[0015] FIG. 2 is a conceptual drawing of a three-dimensional imaging system using multiple light sources.

[0016] FIG. 3 is a diagram of functional components of an illustrative laser beam director.

[0017] FIG. 4 is a cross section view of the laser beam director of FIG. 3 taken along line 4-4.

[0018] FIG. 5 is a flow chart of a method of producing a three-dimensional image of a target through atmospheric turbulence.

[0019] FIG. 6 is a conceptual diagram of functional blocks of a multiframe blind deconvolution

algorithm for deblurring two-dimensional images.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0020] Embodiments of the present invention are directed to systems and methods for three-dimensional imaging of one or more objects or targets through atmospheric turbulence. The effects of atmospheric turbulence, which can otherwise limit the seeing parameter r_0 of a telescope or imaging system, may be mitigated and a high-resolution or super-resolved three-dimensional image of an object or target may be produced. As used herein, the terms “target” and “object” may be used interchangeably when allowed by context.

[0021] FIG. 1 shows a conceptual diagram of one embodiment of a three-dimensional imaging system **100** in which a point spread function or a transfer function is derived from one image sensor and is used for the deconvolution of a series of two-dimensional images formed from a separate image sensor. A first light source may produce a first output **104** that is directed by means for directing **106** to a target **112**. The target **112** may be at high-altitude, in orbit about the Earth, or may be a space object. Pulses of the first output **104** may be swept across the target **112** and as a result different pulses in the output **104** may be reflected from different portions of the target **112**. The first output **104** may include a train or sequence of pulses **104_{1-N}**, which may be relatively short-duration pulses. For example, in certain embodiments the first light source **102** may produce an output **104** of pulses **104_{1-N}** with a two-nanosecond (2 ns) pulse width.

[0022] Receiving means **118** may receive reflected light **114** that has been reflected from the target **112** and traveled through atmospheric turbulence **116**. The reflected light **114** may include a portion of the first output **104** from the first light source **102**, which may be a laser. In certain embodiments, e.g., those used to track a dark object in the Earth’s shadow, a quasi-coherent or temporally incoherent laser may be used as the first light source **102**. The receiving means **118** may produce a collected light output **120** that may include various wavelengths of the first output **104**.

[0023] A first portion of the collected light output **120** including photons of the first output **104**

may be directed to a first image sensor **130**, which may be a “fast” focal plane array or time of arrival sensor. Focusing optics **134** may focus the first portion on the first image sensor **130** to form an image **132** of the target **112**. The first image sensor **130** may have the capability of detecting and storing successive two-dimensional images, or image slices **132_{1-N}**, from the light received from the first light source after reflection from the target **112**. The first image sensor **130** may include a focal plane array (FPA), which may be of arbitrary size, and may include an array of pixels of semiconductor photodetectors. The photodetectors may include, but are not limited to, suitable photodiodes including avalanche photodiodes. The term “image slices” may refer to stored two-dimensional image, including signals representing such two-dimensional images.

[0024] The first image sensor **130** may have a clock cycle that is of the same order as or faster than the pulse width of the pulses of the first output **104**. Each of the pixels of the first image sensor **130** may include or be connected to a single corresponding laser radar processing-electronics cell or circuit (not shown) to amplify and/or store amplitudes and ranges associated with pulses of the reflected light **114**. Suitable laser radar processing circuitry may include storage and switching electronics or circuitry, for example as described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,446,529 and/or U.S. Pat. No. 6,414,746, the contents of both of which are incorporated herein by reference. The first image sensor **130** may store successive image slices **132_{1-N}** of the target **112** in internal bins or buffer circuitry. In certain embodiments, two or more image slices **132_{1-N}** may be read out from the first image sensor **130** between received pulses of the first output **104**.

[0025] The first image sensor **130** may be operable to detect the photon intensity and time of arrival of pulses of the first output **104** that have been reflected from the target **112** and received at the various pixels or detectors of the sensor **130**. In certain embodiments, the first image sensor **130** may include a sensor or hybrid sensor as disclosed in U.S. Pat. No. 6,414,746. Various filters or filter wheels (not shown) may be used to detect desired energy bands of the first portion of the collected light output **120** that are within the detectivity range of the first image sensor **130**.

[0026] A second portion of the collected light output **120** may be used to determine a point

spread function of the system **100**. For example, a second portion of the collected light output **120** may be directed by suitable apparatus, such as a dichroic or beam splitter **124**, to a second focal plane array or image sensor **136**. Focusing optics **140** may focus the second portion on the second image sensor **136** forming a second sensor image **138** of the target **112**.

[0027] With continued reference to FIG. 1, means for multiframe blind deconvolution (MFBD) **148** may process one or more second sensor images **138** to produce a point spread (PSF) output **152** that includes an estimate or calculation of an atmospheric point spread function for the system **100**. The means for multiframe blind deconvolution **148** may include suitable multiframe blind deconvolution algorithms. The point spread function **152** may then be processed by means for deconvolution **150** to deconvolve or deblur each of the image slices **132_{1-N}** produced by the first image sensor **130** thereby forming deblurred image slices **132'_{1-N}**. The means for deconvolution **150** may include suitable deconvolution algorithms and may be implemented in various hardware and/or software.

[0028] Means for combining **154** may be used to combine the deblurred image slices **132'_{1-N}** to form a three-dimensional image **156** of the target **112**. Because the point spread function **152** produced by the means for MFBD **148** is determined for incoherent or quasi-coherent light, the effects of speckle are minimized when the three-dimensional image **156** is produced. The three-dimensional image **156** may be displayed on display means **158** such as a cathode ray tube (CRT), flat panel display, liquid crystal display (LCD), or the like. Data associated with the three-dimensional image **156** may be utilized for various purposes including, but not limited to, observing, targeting and tracking the target **112**.

[0029] The means for combining **154** may include suitable combination algorithms. The means for multiframe blind deconvolution **148**, the means for deconvolution **150**, and the means for combining **154** may include or be included within common or shared algorithms, software and/or hardware. For example parallel processor means or configurations may implement the means for multiframe blind deconvolution **148**, the means for deconvolution **150** and/or the means for combining **154**. Suitable processing means may by way of non-limiting example include parallel processing systems including 32-bit and/or 64-bit UNIX servers in 16-way and 32-way

configurations and also large Linux clusters. In certain embodiments, processing means such as those at the Maui High Performance Computing Center Air Force Research Laboratory may be used.

[0030] The first light source **102** may be any suitable pulsed laser. In certain embodiments, a suitable pulsed laser may be used that produces pulses with fluence values of 0.1 to 100 Joules per pulse. In certain embodiments, the first light source **102** may have an active medium that produces an output in the near infrared band, for example at 830 nanometers or at 1.06 microns. Suitable active media for the first light source **102** may include, but are not limited to, chromium-doped lithium strontium aluminum fluoride (Cr:LiSAF) and neodymium-doped yttrium aluminum garnet (Nd:YAG).

[0031] The pulse characteristics of output **104** may be actively controlled by known timing and/or pulse-compression techniques and devices (not shown) or means for pulse compression. Suitable pulse-compression devices, may include, but are not limited to, grating-pair compressors, prism-pair compressors, and chirped dielectric mirrors. In certain embodiments, the first light source **102** may be mode locked, actively or passively, to facilitate a short pulse width, e.g., to produce pulses with a pulse width less than or equal to five nanoseconds. In certain embodiments, pulses widths may be between about 0.1 to about 2 nanoseconds. As shorter and shorter pulse widths are obtained by new pulse compression techniques and apparatus, one of skill in the art should understand that the means for compression of the present invention will have greater utility and scope.

[0032] Mirrors within the means for directing **106** may be movable so that the output **104** can be directed to any region of the observable sky. For example, various mirrors of the means for directing **106** may be mounted on gimbaled mirror mounts and the means for directing **106** may include an azimuth table. In certain embodiments, the means for directing **106** may be a laser beam director with multiple mirrors or lenses, e.g., one with primary, secondary, and tertiary mirrors. In certain embodiments, the means for directing **106** may have a 60-cm diameter aperture or primary mirror. One example of a means for directing, a laser beam director, is described below for FIG. 3.

[0033] In certain embodiments, the receiving means **118** may include a collector or telescope and may include one or more mirrors or lenses. For example, the receiving means **118** may include a telescope with primary, secondary and tertiary mirrors. In certain embodiments the receiving means **118** may include a relatively large-aperture telescope, for example, a telescope with a 3.67m primary mirror such as the Advanced Electro-Optical System (AEOS) at the Maui Space Surveillance Center of the U.S. Air Force.

[0034] Referring now to FIG. 2, a second embodiment of a three-dimensional imaging system **200** is shown that includes a second light source. A first light source **202** produces a first output **204** of pulsed laser light **204_{1-N}**. The first output **204** is directed by a laser beam director **206** to a target **212**. Receiving means **218** collect or receive some of the first output **204** that has been reflected from the target and traveled through atmospheric turbulence **216**.

[0035] A second light source **208** may be utilized to produce an image of the target to derive a point spread function for the system **200**. Examples of a second light source **208** may include, but are not limited to, a laser, multiple lasers, the sun, and/or self-emission from the target. When one or more lasers are used as the second light source, a second output **210** from the laser(s) may be directed to the target by the first laser beam director **206** or a second, separate laser beam director **209**. The second output **210** may include one or more pulses and may be used to illuminate the target **212** with a light of a different spectral range or bandwidth than the first output **204**. This system **200** may be advantageous to produce a three-dimensional image of a “dark” target, i.e., one that is in the Earth’s shadow.

[0036] Continuing with the description of FIG. 2, a first image sensor **230**, e.g., a time of arrival sensor or “fast” focal plane array, may receive a collected light output **220** from the receiving means **218**. Directing mirrors **222a**, **222b** may direct the collected light output **220**. The collected light output **220** may include light from the first light source **202** and the second light source(s) **208** that has been reflected from the target **212**. The first image sensor **230** may record two-dimensional images or image slices **232_{1-N}** of the target **212**.

[0037] A second portion of the collected light output **220** may be directed to a second image sensor **236**, for example by a beam splitter **224**. A focusing lens **240** may focus the second portion on the second image sensor **236** forming a second sensor image **238** of the target **212**. The second image sensor **236** may produce a signal **239** corresponding to the second sensor image **238** and this corresponding signal **239** may be processed by a means for multiframe blind deconvolution **240**. Based on the laser returns or pulses from the second light source **208** that have been reflected from the target **212** and focused at the second image sensor **236**, the means for multiframe blind deconvolution **240** may calculate and produce as an output an atmospheric point spread function **252** of the systems **200**.

[0038] The second image sensor **136** may be configured or made of materials to detect different wavelengths than the first image sensor **130**. For example, the first image sensor **130** may have detector materials to detect light in the near infrared (NIR) or medium-wave infrared (MWIR) ranges while the second image sensor **136** may be made from detector material(s) sensitive to visible light. For example, in certain embodiments, the second image sensor **136** may have peak detectivity near 700 nm. Semiconductor detector materials for the first and second image sensors **130**, **136** may be selected based on bandgap energies and corresponding detection capabilities.

[0039] The point spread function **252** may be used by a means for deconvolution **250** to deblur or improve the resolution of each of the two-dimensional image slices 232_{1-N} , forming deblurred two-dimensional image slices $232'_{1-N}$. After deblurring, the deblurred two-dimensional image slices $232'_{1-N}$ may be combined by a means for combining **254** to form a three-dimensional image **256** of the target **212**. The three-dimensional image **256** may be displayed, as for example on screen **258**.

[0040] Because three-dimensional imaging may be affected by laser speckle, illumination that minimizes laser speckle and speckle-associated blurring may be desirable for determining the atmospheric point spread function. The use of an incoherent or quasi-coherent light source as the second light source **208** may facilitate the minimization of such laser speckle. For example, multiple lasers having the same or nearly the same output wavelengths may be used as the

second light source **208** to illuminate the target **212**. Multiple lasers may be synchronized to provide extra energy without damage threshold problems, e.g., thermal failure and dielectric breakdown of individual laser and/or parametric gain media. Techniques known in the art may be used to provide a common laser boresight for such multiple laser sources. In certain embodiments, a single, temporally- incoherent or quasi-coherent laser may be used as the second light source **208**. In certain embodiment, the sun may be used as a source of incoherent light.

[0041] Referring now to FIG. 3, functional components of one example of a means for directing are shown. The means for directing may include a laser beam director **300**. The laser beam director may include one or more laser sources **302** with their outputs configured to form an afocal laser input or beam **303**, for example with a 10-cm diameter, that may be directed into the laser beam director **300**. The laser beam **303** may be directed along an azimuth table center normal **308** through an aperture **310a** in an azimuth table **310**. The azimuth table **310** may rotate and be positioned at a desired azimuth or heading.

[0042] One or more directing mirrors **312a**, **312b** may be utilized to direct the laser beam **303** within an outer shell **326** of the laser beam director **300**. The laser beam **303** may be directed to various optical elements, e.g., primary **318**, secondary **314**, and tertiary **316** mirrors, that may act to expand the laser beam **303** to a desired diameter, e.g., 60 cm. A primary mirror **318** may direct the expanded laser beam **303** to a tracking mirror **320** such as a tracking flat. The tracking mirror **320** may pivot on a horizontal axis and also may be mounted on a gimbaled mirror mount **322**.

[0043] The laser beam director **300** may include target tracker and boresight systems **306** that may operate to control the direction of an expanded laser beam output **324** of the laser beam director **300**. By having the capability to pivot along two or more axes, the tracking mirror **320** may direct the expanded laser beam output **324** to a target, for example an artificial satellite, at any position in the observable sky. The output **324** may include an output of a first and/or second light source, e.g., outputs **204** and **210**.

[0044] FIG. 4 shows a cross section view of the laser beam director of FIG. 3, taken along line

4-4. An afocal input **402** may be directed into the laser beam director **300** and may include more outputs from multiple lasers. For example, laser outputs **404a-404i** may be combined and configured as shown to form a first output that may be directed to a target, e.g., target **112**, by a means for directing such as laser beam director **300**.

[0045] Referring now to FIG. 5, a method **500** of producing a three-dimensional image of a target through atmospheric turbulence will now be described. A first output of laser pulses may be directed **502** to a target. The pulses may be received from the target after traveling through atmospheric turbulence **504**. Each pulse may be focused to form **506** a two-dimension (2D) image slice of the target. The two-dimensional image slices may optionally be stored **508** in memory, for example in bins in a first image sensor, such as first image sensor **130**.

[0046] Light from a second light source may be received **510** from the target and an image of the target may be focused or formed **512** on a second image sensor. In certain embodiments, such as those where only a single light source is utilized, light from the first light source may be used to form an image at the second image sensor. Multiframe blind deconvolution (MFBd) may be performed **514** on one or more images received by the second image sensor. A point spread function may be estimated or determined **516** from the multiframe blind deconvolution. Step **510** may be performed at or near the time of step **502** so that the point spread function from the second light source may be valid for or describe nearly the same atmospheric conditions or realizations as the light transmitted from the first light source. A point spread function determined at **516** may be used for a sequence of two or more two-dimensional image slices from the first image sensor.

[0047] In certain embodiments, step **510** may include receiving sunlight **518** that has been reflected from the target and traveled through atmospheric turbulence. In certain embodiments, step **510** may include directing a second output **520** from a second light source, for example an incoherent or quasi-coherent laser, to the target. In certain embodiments, a second light source producing a second output having a coherence time less than certain pulse characteristics of the first output, e.g., pulse width, time between pulses or pulse repetition interval, etc., may be directed to the target.

[0048] Continuing with the description of method 500, the point spread function determined from the image(s) from the second image sensor may be used to deconvolve 522 the two-dimensional image slices of the first image sensor, forming 524 deblurred two-dimensional image slices. The deblurred two-dimensional image slices may be combined 526 to form a three-dimensional image of the target. The three-dimensional image produced by method 500 may have improved spatial resolution.

[0049] Method 500 may include additional steps of a calculating a maximum likelihood of a noise function and calculating gradients of a noiseless image may be calculated. Steepest gradient calculations may be made as part of the maximum likelihood calculation(s). The object, e.g., target, and point spread function may be parameterized. *A priori* knowledge may be incorporated 528 as part of the step of performing multiframe blind deconvolution 514. For example, positivity constraints may be implemented for the object and the point spread function. Also for example, penalty terms may be added to the likelihood function for the object. *A priori* knowledge may be incorporated in terms of an object pixel density function in which case the maximum likelihood formulation may be a maximum *a posteriori* (MAP) function or estimation. A regularizing technique such as use of a sieve or small smoothing kernel may be used to prevent the maximization procedure from overfitting. A guard band may be used to reconstruct an image of the target.

[0050] In FIG. 6, function blocks of a multiframe blind deconvolution algorithm 600 for deblurring a two-dimensional image is shown. To process an image received at a second image sensor, a maximum likelihood of a noise function may be estimated or calculated 602 and gradients of a noiseless image may be calculated at functional block 604. A noiseless image may be determined 606 and a point spread function may be estimated 608.

[0051] Additional steps or functional blocks in the multiframe blind deconvolution algorithm 600 may include implementing a parameterization of the point spread function 610 and implementing a parameterization of an object 612. The steps of implementing a parameterization of the point spread function 610 and the object 612 may include implementing

positivity constraints **614**. An initial object estimate may be made **616** using a centroid-aligned average of data frames or image slices.

[0052] A basis function, e.g., a Zernike polynomial, expansion of a phase-aberration function in a pupil function may be made **618**. Initial coefficients corresponding to a diffraction-limited point spread function may be used **620** and tip/tilt information from the image centroids may be used **622**. In certain embodiments a guard band may be implemented **624**. A regularizing sieve may be implemented **626** in certain embodiments. The sieve may be related to a signal-to-noise ratio of each set of image slices and may be a Gaussian sieve.

[0053] One of skill in the art would understand that the functions represented by the functional blocks in FIG. 6, are not limited to any specific hardware or software. For example, one of skill in the art should understand that the functions may be provided through the use of either shared or dedicated hardware, including, but not limited to, hardware including a computer-readable medium and/or capable of executing software. For example, a single shared digital signal processor or central processing unit may provide the function of blocks **612** and **614** of FIG. 6. Additionally, it should be understood that the functional blocks shown in FIG. 6 can be performed by a single computer or processor system or linked systems, e.g., processors operating in parallel.

[0054] Use of one embodiment of the present invention will now be described with reference to the accompanying drawings. A laser beam director or other suitable means may direct a first output of a first light source to a target. The position of the target may be known by observation or by the use of look-up tables. A receiving means collects a portion of the first output that has been reflected from the target and traveled through atmospheric turbulence. The portion of the light from the first light source is directed to a first image sensor, e.g., a fast focal plane or a time of arrival sensor. The first image sensor may detect a sequence of two-dimensional image slices of the target and may output a corresponding sequence of signals. The first image sensor may have a number, e.g., 32, of bins to store signals corresponding to the two-dimensional image slices.

[0055] Light from one or more light sources is received by the receiving means or a similar device. The light source(s) may include, but is/are not limited to, the sun, the first source, a second source, e.g., a laser, which may be a quasi-coherent or temporally incoherent laser, multiple lasers, and self-emission from the target. Light received at the receiving means or similar device may be directed to and focused on a second image sensor, forming an image or a succession of images of the target.

[0056] Signals related to one or more of the images from the second image sensor may be processed by a means for multiframe blind deconvolution and a point spread function for the atmospheric realizations under which the system operates may be estimated or determined. The means for multiframe blind deconvolution may iteratively calculate and revise the point spread function. Once the point spread function has been calculated, it may be used by a means for deconvolution to deblur the two-dimensional image slices produced by the first image sensor. The deblurred two-dimensional image slices may be combined to form a three-dimensional image of the target by a means for combining.

[0057] Accordingly, use of the present invention may provide improved ground-based or aircraft-based three-dimensional imaging of objects or targets through atmospheric turbulence. For example, objects in the Earth's atmosphere or in orbit about the Earth may be imaged with increased resolution in three spatial dimensions, including depth.

[0058] Because laser sources may be used that produce pulses that are on the scale of nanoseconds in duration, or less, and since light travels at approximately one foot per nanosecond in free space, resolution including depth resolution on the order of one foot or 30 cm may be obtained. The time between pulses may be adjusted or selected as desired based on various factors including, but not limited to, the pulse width and the size of a particular target. This resolution, or super-resolution, may be obtained with a ground-based telescope even though the seeing parameter for the telescope is less than the diffraction-limited case. A point spread function calculated from an incoherent or quasi-coherent light source may be used for the super-resolution.

[0059] Multiframe blind deconvolution may be performed on one or more images at the second image sensor to produce a point spread function, which can be used to deconvolve or deblur a set of two-dimensional image slices from the first image sensor, e.g., time of arrival sensor. The calculation of the point spread function may be iterated or recalculated for different two-dimensional image slices from the first image sensor. In this way, super-resolution of the two-dimensional image slices may be obtained and a high resolution three-dimensional image of the target or object may be produced. The calculation of the point spread function may be performed independently of the acquisition of data from the target by the first image sensor. Thus very short duration exposures of the target may be recorded by the first image sensor, e.g., time of arrival sensor or detector, thereby preserving diffraction-limited spatial frequency information about the target, and super-resolved using a speckle-minimized point spread function determined from the second image sensor.

[0060] A prospective example of a three-dimensional imaging system according to the present invention will now be described to illustrate the relationship between power and fluence levels of the laser outputs directed to a target and the detectivity of a first image sensor. For this example, a known artificial satellite, Object 18123 DMSP F8, is used, where “DMSP” is the acronym for the Defense Meteorological Satellite Program. The satellite has a 1.2 m body diameter and is 3.5 meters long and has a solar panel having an area of 9.3 m^2 . The satellite is known to have an orbital altitude that varies from 832 to 851 Km, at an inclination of 98.8 degrees.

[0061] A first light source may be used that produces a first output or beam with pulses having fluence levels of one Joule per pulse. Directing the first output to the target, and setting the target distance to 1,000 Km (for simplification), 3.18 mJ/m^2 are directed to or incident on the target, assuming the first output diverges into 20 micro-radians at 1 Mm and the output beam has a flat top at the target. Assuming the target has a reflectivity of 10% and that the portion of the first output that is reflected by the target is reflected into a solid angle of 2π steradians, then $50.67 \text{ micro-Joules/m}^2/\text{steradian}$ are reflected by the target for each pulse.

[0062] For a three-dimensional imaging system having a receiving means or collector telescope with a primary mirror with a diameter of 3.67 m, the primary mirror will collect $\pi/4$

$(3.67/10^6)$ steradians at the distance of the target, corresponding to $5.36 \times 10^{-16} \text{ J/m}^2$. For a 30 cm pixel on the satellite, i.e., an area on the satellite of 30 cm x 30 cm, a 3.67m telescope will collect $4.8 \times 10^{-17} \text{ J}$. If the first output produces light of wavelengths at 830 nm, which may be produced by a laser with a Cr:LiSAF gain medium, then there are approximately 4.19×10^{18} photons/J. Consequently, each 30 cm pixel reflects approximately 200 photons into the pixel footprint.

[0063] Assuming 22 % quantum efficiency for the detector materials in the first image sensor and a round trip transmission coefficient of 22%, then approximately 10 photoelectrons are produced or detected by the first image sensor for a 30 cm pixel footprint. So for each pulse directed to the Object 18123 DMSP F8 satellite, the first image sensor detector detects approximately 467 photoelectrons from the satellite body and 1033 photoelectrons from the solar panel.

[0064] Signals corresponding to photoelectrons may be stored in memory or bins associated with the first image sensor, and a point spread function may be derived through multiframe blind deconvolution of an image received by a second image sensor. The point spread function may be used to deconvolve or deblur the two dimensional image signals and deblurred two-dimensional image slices of the satellite may be combined to form a three-dimensional image of the satellite.

[0065] In certain embodiments, the means for multiframe blind deconvolution may include a suitable multiframe blind deconvolution (MFBD) algorithm that is implemented in MATLAB and/or C or C++. In certain embodiments, the `deconvblind()` function of MATLAB may be used as part of the means for multiframe blind deconvolution. Use of MATLAB may allow for cross-platform compatibility. In certain embodiment, the means for blind deconvolution may be a multiframe blind deconvolution algorithm utilizing *a priori* knowledge and/or maximum likelihood constraints. In certain embodiments, a multiframe blind deconvolution algorithm may implement maximum likelihood constraints may for a noise function, which may represent a Poisson noise case, a Gaussian noise case, or both.

[0066] Although the present invention has been described in detail with reference to certain versions thereof, other versions are possible. For example, while a single receiving means has generally been described, separate receiving means for each light source may be utilized within the scope of the present invention. Furthermore, while certain solid state laser or gain media have been described as being suitable as light sources, others may be used, including gas and liquid dye gain media. Furthermore, more than one first and/or second image sensor may be used.

[0067] The reader's attention is directed to all papers and documents that are filed concurrently with this specification and which are open to public inspection with this specification, and the contents of all such papers and documents are incorporated herein by reference. All the features disclosed in this specification, including any accompanying claims, abstract, and drawings, may be replaced by alternative features serving the same, equivalent or similar purpose, unless expressly stated otherwise. Thus, unless expressly stated otherwise, each feature disclosed is one example only of a generic series of equivalents or similar features.